DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 240 801 EC 161 874

AUTHOR Shalowitz, Elaine L.
TITLE The Process of Composition Instruction with Students with Brain-Injury, Brain-Damage or Neurological Impairment.
PUB DATE Mar 83
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (34th, Detroit, MI, March 17-19, 1983).
PUB TYPE Guides - Classroom Use - Guides (For Teachers) (052)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Elementary Secondary Education; *Neurological Impairments; *Teaching Methods; *Writing (Composition)

ABSTRACT

Suggestions are offered for teaching composition to brain-injured, brain-damaged, neurologically impaired students. Teachers are cautioned to choose a limited topic based on students' concrete experiences, concentrate on setting up generalizations and theses, and help students consider ways to expand and organize the topic. For creative writing, the paper suggests introduction of ideas of plot, character, theme, and style, with a gradual transition to abstractions. Then short novels can be presented and summarization and analytical skills practiced. Additional areas for composition instruction are letter writing, test taking skills, and research skills. The development, repetitive, supportive nature of composition instruction for this population is stressed. (CL)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

ED240801

The Process of Composition Instruction with Students with Brain-Injury Brain Damage or Neurological Impairment

Elaine L. Shalowitz
Education Specialist/Assistant Professor of English
University of the District of Columbia

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Elaine L. Shalowitz
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

EC161874

THE PROCESS OF COMPOSITION INSTRUCTION WITH STUDENTS WITH BRAIN-INJURY

BRAIN-DAMAGE OR NEUROLOGICAL IMPAIRMENT

There is no monolithic approach to the teaching of composition. Variety abounds -- variety in teaching styles, in learning potential. Specific objectives and time allotments often condition the approach taken. And once the writing assignment is launched, the students go through their own process to bring the task to fruition. Basic composing realities recognize the intricacies of developing and integrating words into ideas on a particular topic, by strategies of structure and nuances of language. All of the above may be a source of sleepless nights and daytime dread, but it is not impossible. For the brain-infarcted student, however, the task may seem forbidding and frustrating.

Where, then, might a teacher of composition begin when working with the brain-injured student? Suggestion #1 is to begin <u>small</u>. Choose a limited topic. Derive the initial assignments from some concrete and immediate experience of the student, not from some lofty, abstract concept. Much discussion must take place at this stage. Clearly pinpoint the experience to be written about. Work with the student on creating generalizations from the experience. Next, elicit enumerations, encouraging the student to list the parts of the experience and suggesting some order, such as: 1st, 2nd, 3rd; or before, during, after; or first, then, next, finally; or yesterday, today, tomorrow. Teacher intervention at this stage serves to coax out of the student the words and the ideas that sometimes seem stuck. Talk about the list of items with the student. Practice combining items, organizing them in some clearly-defined pattern and joining groups of them with connecting words. THESE ARE THE TALKING, THINKING STAGES OF THE FIRST FEW WRITING ASSIGNMENTS. The brain-injured student requires considerably more assistance in being shown how to think about the topic in order to organize it for writing.

Once several items and ideas are expressed, the student may be ready to organize them into an essay. Frequently, however, the student needs continuing assistance in expanding his or her thoughts on the subject. Word association and vocabulary extension practices help to cue ideas with key words. Other drills concentrating on size, shape, color, and other aspects of classifying and categorizing, assist in suggesting to the student techniques for organizing the data. Also, at this initial stage of writing, the student requires definite direction in ending the essay. At first, suggestions may have to be made for the student to think about and then to choose the one that seems appropriate for the essay's conclusion. Here, again, conclusions must be rehearsed and practiced. Slowly the student begins to understand the concept of conclusion or ending to a composition and carefully he or she is guided into a technique or method that works in creating endings.

For less seriously brain-injured students, letter writing may be introduced to motivate the student to write more fully about several experiences, to encourage the synthesis of the various steps with increasing independence that had been rehearsed in Phase I. For some students this becomes an interesting challenge; for others, it is too amorphous at this stage of their rehabilitation.

Whether the letter writing becomes a successful activity or not, the next phase involves vicarious experience. For this the newspaper serves as an excellent resource. The student selects a short, and, if possible, for greater interest, controversial article and reads it silently. The teacher reads it silently also. A discussion follows which aims at pinpointing -- once again -- the topic of this article and some of the specific points it raises. Lists may be set up and certain key words are singled out. One or more questions relating to the article are either elicited or suggested. From these questions, an attempt is made to form a thesis for writing.

Brain-injured students need considerable help in setting up generalizations and theses. I have been involved with students, who, after all of the above took place, were still at a loss to state a thesis.

After a workable thesis has been developed, the students need assistance in considering ways to expand this statement and to organize the paper. Help in "seeding" (that is, both in dividing and dissecting the statement into meaningful parts) as well as in offering suggestions on how to arrange the items, or possible approaches for organizing the information, provide crucial intervention during this phase. From the expanded canvas, the student now groups, limits and selects, all to be completed before the start of the essay itself. During the first several phases of composition instruction, these steps might have to be "walked through" several times.

There appears to be a decided diminution of initiative in brain-injured students. Thus, for them, simply selecting items to develop requires both guidance and practice. When the student seems confident or relatively confident that he or she has an idea of what to do, then the teacher must back off completely and let the student write the rough draft. After the rough draft is completed, the student often reflects uncertainly about whether the assignment has been fulfilled, whether this is "what was wanted." Early in the process of instruction the student must be impressed with the fact that these papers need not be "what the instructor wants" but rather "what the student feels is appropriate and wishes to write."

Reading the paper over with the student, the thesis usually is discernible as the operating generalization previously developed. Also, the brainstormed items usually appear in some recognizable form. But, despite all of the previous efforts, there is often no conclusion in the first draft. Quick reiteration of the previous steps and suggestions of several possible conclusions assist the student not only in selecting one to end the paper, but also in recognizing the significance of completion in the process of composition.

Next, the paper is reviewed with the student for construction of sentences, word order and choice, transitions and other major elements of form. After thorough joint editing, the final copy is ready for "attack." More often than not the student feels good about the effort and derives pleasure in reading and re-reading the polished copy.

There is no question about it, the student has been led step by step until this point. From my experience this kind of "academic coddling" is essential. Obviously, variations in degree must exist depending on the seriousness of the impairment. The goal is for the student to begin to recognize process and to fix patterns of response. This sounds mechanical, but, again, represents a most necessary step.

In my own situation, while I continue to use the newspaper, even though I am now ready to move into the next phase, the choice of articles increases in sophistication and becomes more a matter of the student's selection and less involved with instructor intervention. Moving next on to a different kind of composition challenge -- creative writing --, I use a collection of material that seems to be on an adequate grade level of difficulty, to be appropriate in length (neither so brief that the student is unable to understand the subtleties nor too long that the student becomes bored), high-level enough in interest and diverse enough in offering fiction and non-fiction in one relatively slim volume. (Human Dimensions in Poetry and Prose by Woolf, et.al., Prentice-Hall, 79)

Reviewing the concepts of time (beginning, middle and end) and place, I next introduced ideas of plot, character, theme and style. In talking about the selection, initial emphasis is placed upon the concrete, upon what has been referred to as the basic categories of comprehension. Slowly I attempt to move into simple abstractions and then, gradually, increase the difficulty of the questions requiring abstract or symbolic responses. Attention is drawn to descriptions. Sententes are lifted from the selection to study any one or several of the elements and to elicit reaction from the student. Practice in rephrasing certain sentences attempts to promote flexibility of thought. Myriad questions

are "shot out" in an effort to encourage thinking on and about the selection. Words are randomly singled out to share ideas on specific meanings according to the context.

As the student grows in confidence and in adequacy of performance, short novels should be introduced. It does not matter if the student vaguely remembers having encountered the work previously (before the injury). Often this slight recollection aids the student in connecting with the material. The student is given a time frame within which to complete the work and daily goals for reading are worked out. Long-range (two week) assignments are not always understood and the distribution of work cannot be evenly organized at first. Once the student has completed the work, discussion must center on the categories of comprehension and the literal level of meaning. At this point summarization skills need to be overtly taught and repeatedly practiced. These skills had been worked on earlier, both in Phase One and in Phase Two, to some extent -- but they were either elicited from experience or evolved simply from newspaper articles and short stories. Now, the summary skills involve plot development, sequence, order, coherence, enumeration of events..., thereby establishing the skeleton of the story from beginning to end with clarity and precision. Frustration is reduced and may even be avoided if this step is conscientiously followed. Than, and only then, does the student seem comfortable enough to organize the details and to act on a writing assignment relating to the novel.

Tedious as the above appears, it is necessary and seems to make an enormous difference in the depth of response by the student. Once a coherent and clear restatement of the story in the student's words is achieved, the next step may be attempted. This involves attention to analytical skills. The problem is that these skills of analysis, reasoning and higher problem-solving are slow to reappear, and are often limited when they do. However, I have found that they can be re-taught and re-developed.

First, by raising a simple question dealing with "why," the students thinking is directed toward reasons for something and causal relationships. Why, for example, the student might be asked, after having completed The Old Man and the Sea, do you think

the Old Man refused to let go of the big fish, even though he realized it was being attacked and eaten by the sea's giant scavenger?

Or "so what?" So what that Kino viewed the pearl as his way out of poverty in The Pearl? What were the implications for him, his family, and for the story because of this view? Reasons for actions or reactions may now be explored and considered. Problem-solving skill rebuilding begins with simple probing questions and increases slowly in complexity -- but increase it must to help the student grow in analytical skills. Repeated considerations of the theme of the novel and practice in writing a single paragraph on theme, providing sufficient evidence and support, are important at this juncture.

The next phase (Four) covers logging and letter-writing. For some reason -- and one could offer possible various explanations -- the student builds greater self-confidence after the simple analytical experiences and after guided attention to summary skills and seems better able to transfer these skills into the writing of letters, mostly personal ones. Where business letters are concerned, the teacher my find it necessary to re-teach letter-writing skills in terms of appropriate form. Here again the student achieves enormous pride in realizing that something is (or could be) mailed with his or her signature. This phase also serves as a welcomed pause in intensity before Phases Five and Six, both of which are more demanding. The logging part may come in an earlier phase or may come at this point, depending upon the nature of the trauma and the rehabilitative pattern for each student. In either case, this involves the keeping of a daily record of activities and a brief statement of reactions to each event, to several events or to the day as a whole.

Improvement in composition skills for the brain-injured student ultimately leads to giving attention to test-taking skills which involves short answers or

essays. At this point, time constraints, ability to focus on the specific question being asked, ability to recall the information required for an adequate response and decisions as to method of response must be considered. Drill and repeated practice in all of the above skill areas are necessary. Essay response strategies must be rehearsed. Often the process calls for the student to bring the specific subject-matter text and material to the composition class; then, with the aid of the writing teacher, speculations are made on several possible essay questions. The student attempts to write answers to these questions, within a given time limitation. In some instances, other departments will release old tests which can be used for the same purpose and in the same way. This phase requires continuous upgrading of difficulty to allow the student to develop increased complexity of treatment. If the brain-injured or neurologically-impaired student is to achieve sucess in his or her college work or is to feel some progress to encourage and to motivate him/her to "keep at it," the writing teacher must take this phase seriously, although it may appear to be off-limits in the more traditional writing curriculum and thought to be the responsibility of the student or of the particular department in which the test is given. But the other departments rarely teach how to take their tests.

The first five phases herein outlined could be handled in a special college composition class of limited enrollment, or in a support service arrangement with a one-to-one relationship. It could fit into a semester's work plan. Since this total program, as developed here, is designed to take a minimum of one year, during the second "semester," however that might be handled, the student would review and work toward strengthening everything covered in the first part of the course, with an emphasis on less and less direction from the teacher.

Next, the student should be ready to learn -- or relearn -- research skills. This involves the entire gamut of research behaviors: the selection of a topic, limiting and delineating it; the use of the library, the gathering of data;

organizing, presenting and documenting the data; preparing the various parts of the paper, etc. This is often difficult for the student under usual circumstances. How much more difficult it is for students with neurological impairments!

In dealing with this phase the teacher has to move exceedingly slowly and has to assist the student with each step, repeatedly. This first, guided effort should be on a very simple and limited level. Its aim is to rehearse the steps and to provide a lasting model to which the student may refer. In the course of working on research skills, certain "higher-level" practice activities, such as reproducing a page from one of the sources and eliminating every tenth word (modified cloze exercises) and then having the student supply an appropriate word, or drill in the working of syllogisms seem to sharpen thinking skills and better prepare the student for research. It may even be desirable to teach analytical skills and to spend some time on induction and deduction, on denotative and connotative meanings. Needless to say, the temptation is ever present for the student to copy much of the data verbatim; care must be exerted to demonstrate the need for understanding before paraphrasing can be handled. Here again practice in paraphrasing sample data helps the student learn how to handle his/her research situation. In this connection I have used sections of Altick's Preface to Critical Thinking.

The teacher of composition to the brain-injured, brain-damaged, neurologically impaired student has to be willing to wait, willing to move slowly and concretely through the panoply of skills and abilities involved in the communication process and through those areas especially required for the writing process. In this particular context, they include: talking, suggesting, sharing, rehearsing, cueing, reinforcing, directing, redirecting, praising, criticizing ... and often beginning all over again. These separate, discrete steps taken and the specific skills covered draw upon many areas,

many disciplines. The success of the student in this class, however, conditions and greatly influences the rest of his/her performance in higher education, in his/her attitudes about him/herself and often the degree to which a real rehabilitation can be achieved. Communications skills sit at the base-line of power and control for the individual in whatever direction he/she may wish to go, in occupational success and in a sense of self-worth. Speaking presents its own particular demands, but writing remains the great challenge. As a part of a larger rehabilitation program or as a special course in a college program, it must be dealt with on a developmental, repetitive, supportive basis. Walking through the steps of composition construction with the student, sometimes several times, may be the only way to present the firm model for the student to follow alone in the future. Overlearning the various parts or stages of the process is often also required. From the various steps and procedures the teacher of composition must select and use those which reinforce the student's understanding, feeling of success and opportunity for greater and greater progress.